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A Russian Joke

A confidential study has been prepared for the Kremlin leadership, The Post's Dusko Doder reports from Moscow, and it calls for a fundamental reform of the Soviet economy to release it from stifling central bureaucratic control. Implicitly, at least, the study urges Yuri Andropov to go beyond the modest half-measures he has introduced so far.

But it is almost certainly a joke—true but a joke. For 20 or more years, confidential studies have been prepared for the Kremlin leadership calling for similar fundamental reform. I have just looked up one such study that surfaced in my correspondent days in Moscow in the mid-1960s. "Our systems of planning, establishing incentives and managing industry were developed in the 1930s," an economist named Agenbegian complained. Doder says the new study observes that the current economic system was created by Stalin in the 1930s. Is that you, Agenbegian?

Why are Andropov's tentative and piecemeal reforms known in Moscow simply as "economic experiments"? American economist Herbert Block writes, in an essay included in Edward Luttwak's new book, "The Grand Strategy of the Soviet Union": "What can we expect of these attempts at reform—or rather, since the word reform has acquired a bad odor in the U.S.S.R. after the failure of Kosygin's reform of 1965, at 'improvements of the economic mechanism'?" In brief, a spade cannot be called a spade.

There is a revealing sameness, almost a monotony, to the critiques of the Stalin-designed command economy whose fundamentals the Kremlin relies on still. Typically, the new study declares that the system is set up to give power and jobs to bureaucrats and paper pushers, who are distinguished from people who actually make things and make things work.

An American might say the situation cries for a Ronald Reagan to attack big government and champion a free market. Soviet reformers say it cries for something commonly called decentralization. They decry the resistance put up by people who would lose their "warm places."

There is an interesting thing about the lobby for Soviet economic reform. It is strong not so much in the Soviet Union, where over the decades conservative forces dominate, as in the West. One rarely reads a Western analysis of the subject—take the Joint Economic Committee's latest report—that does not call on the Soviet Union for a fundamental restructuring of its economy, posing such a difficult project as a "test" for the Soviet system as a whole and doing so in rather a cheerleader's tone.

It is not simply that we Westerners bear in our hearts good wishes for the Soviet Union or Soviet-style socialism. Some of us ignore the possibility that a more productive Soviet economy, far from fattening up Soviet consumers, might give the Kremlin a more competitive or aggressive edge. Others of us challenge the Soviet Union to alter its ways by way of criticizing it for ignoring our advice. Too, it often distresses Americans to see something being done really poorly; their impulse is to reach out and fix it.

But if the West were truly dedicated to Soviet reform, it would halt its exhortations and catcalls, whatever they are, and stop trading with the Soviet Union. Foreign trade is a principal way the Soviet power structure compensates for economic shortfalls, in grain and high technology, for instance, and spares itself the need to conduct politically painful reforms.

As it is, Andropov has a couple of other alternatives. One is to sustain his attack on work-place indiscipline and corruption. Such campaigns tend to peter out, but no one who has seen Soviet overstaffing and laziness can doubt there is immense slack to be taken up without touching on reform.

Then there is muddling through. Economist Block, a very wise man, can see this future: "As a result of a more authoritarian style plus nationalist propaganda plus native passivity, all is quiet on the domestic front. Under such conditions the present political and economic system might toddle on for a lengthy time with minor adjustments in trouble spots. Trouble there would be, but the Soviet economy has been in trouble for two-thirds of a century and the Stalinist economic structure for 55 years. One might even quip that a nation fond of the bottle knows how to handle bottlenecks."

So much, by the way, for easy thoughts that the West by pressure or denial can bend Moscow to its will.